4

CHARACTERISTICS, REFINEMENTS, AND STYLE

4.0

You should weave these characteristics and refinements into your style as you write your document. Regard your reason for writing (sec. 2.1.2) and your audience (sec. 2.1.3) as the determining factors of what you put into your text. Write it all in first- to second-person active voice. Your document can be more formal (a report or a journal piece), or more open (an item for a magazine or newspaper). Here are the characteristics you must impart to either type of document you turn out:

4.1 MORE FORMAL TEXT (REPORT)

4.1.1

Formal text is addressed to a real, named audience (secs. 1.3.2 and 2.1.3).

4.1.2

Be responsive to the charge. You must prove (or disprove, or detail) a specific question to a specific end.

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4.1.3

Use graphics fully (sec. 5.6) to augment (not replace) the written word.

4.1.4

Include your personal opinions only if requested by the assignment.

4.1.5

You must cite and define causes and effects (sec. 8.2.3).

4.1.6

The text should be tabulated using the numeric-decimal system (the Harvard System is not a good option) (secs. 2.4 and 2.4.1).

4.1.7

Write in crisp, declarative, brief sentences, observing all rules of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure (sec. 4.3.1).

4.1.8

The conclusion should answer the original charge of the assignment.

4.1.9

Find suggested formats in chapter 9.

4.2 MORE OPEN TEXT (PUBLICATIONS)

4.2.1

The text is, in effect, addressed "to whom it may concern."

4.2.2

The text need only involve a central theme for general interest, but it can be all-inclusive.

4.2.3

The text is usually narrative; graphics are mainly for dressing.

4.2.4

At your option, the text may or may not include your personal opinions.

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4.2.5

You must cite and define causes and effects (sec. 8.2.3).

4.2.6

The text is narrative, but it may include interspersed headings.

4.2.7

Use your best narrative style.

4.2.8

A formal conclusion is at your discretion; you may not want one.

4.2.9

Suggested formats are in chapter 15.

In the previous comparison, item 4.1.6 advocates the numeric-decimal system for indexing documents, as it is superior to the old-fashioned Harvard System. The latter uses two types of numbers and two cases of letters. That recommendation and its implications were discussed in detail in section 2.4.1.

4.3 SOME HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS

Here are some things I've learned over the past half century that you may not find in other books:

4.3.1 NO SOLECISMS

Follow all the rules of English grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation. You might have paid more attention in English 101, but now you can get good help from Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, any edition, then enjoy the satirical list in appendix 4.3.1.

4.3.2 SPELLING

Spelling is important. I cannot spell every English word, but when reading, I can tell bad spelling. A misspelled word jumps off the page and punches me in the eye. Bad spelling can deflate any professional letter because it is readily detectable and gives a negative impression of you in the receiver's mind. Reliance on a computer's spell checker is not the best bet. Sometimes it is wrong. Among others over the past few years, an instance quickly comes to mind. The spell checker responded to my inquiry for *supersede* with *supercede*. Wrong. It is from the Latin *seder*, to sit (above).

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Don't overlook the obvious; some misspellings may be hiding in plain sight. And some correct ones may not appear at first sight. Check every doubtful word. "Wright, write rite right," is a correctly spelled and punctuated sentence that could have been written as, "Wheelmaker, escribe protocol correctly."

The coach pushed the dean to restore eligibility to his suspended defensive tackle, for Saturday's big football game. Reluctantly the dean offered the player, "This is a spelling test Joe, I'll give you one word, and if you get just *one* letter correct, you pass. Spell coffee!" "Uhh, K-A-U-P-H-Y."

You all know about phonetic variations. One spelled fish as GHOTI because he learned *f* as in touGH, *I* as in wOmen, and *sh* as in noTIon.

Don't forget the *e* between the *g* and the *a* in *interchangeable*. And no *e* between the *g* and the *m* in both *acknowledgment* and *judgment*. Don't forget one *s* and two *c's* in desiccate. Make yourself use the dictionary. Not only will you get it right, now, but you'll remember it for next time.

4.3.3 PUNCTUATION

All English grammar texts will give you the rules for standard punctuation, but they do not give enough attention to the use (or misuse) of the hyphen (-). It is used correctly when breaking a word at the right margin that will continue on the next line, and it is proper in combining words, as in *old-fashioned*. Lazy writers often use a hyphen in place of a comma. Wrong! The hyphen and the comma are *not* interchangeable. Actually, they tell the reader diametrically opposite things. A comma is vertical, like a partition, *separating*. A hyphen is horizontal, like a coupling *joining* two railroad cars. The word hyphen is from the Greek *hyph'hen*, it means together. Here, see the opposite meanings (app. 4.3.3):

Try caffeine-free Coke.
Try caffeine, free Coke.

A comma in the wrong place can totally *reverse* the intended meaning of a sentence.

Surrender, impossible to fight on.
Surrender impossible, to fight on.

In a series, items should be separated by commas, including one between the penultimate item and the *and*.

We had melon, cereal, toast, and coffee. The last two are separate items; *do* use a comma.

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We had melon, toast, coffee, and ham and eggs. The last two are paired items; do *not* use a comma.

And try this one, and see the difference: *Men, Women, and Dogs*.

"Men, Women and Dogs"[1] (app. 4.3.3).

4.3.4 SENTENCE LENGTH

Try to keep your sentences to about a dozen words, *average*, but not rigidly so. Don't add to your work problems by counting words; it wastes time. If you need a fifty-two-word sentence to explain superheating, then use fifty-two. And there is nothing wrong with a one-word sentence such as "No." Use your judgment.

4.3.5 REDUNDANCIES

Omit using nonworking, repetitive, redundant words over and over again. They take space and waste the writer's and reader's time. They add to production costs and bore readers.

Not all deadheads are repetitions. There are many words that do not add to the meaning of a statement, but do bloat. A few "don'ts" in common use that need avoiding:

In other words. If you don't think a phrase you've written states your intended thought, do not let it stand, then add "in other words," followed by a restatement that may or may not be that original bit *in* other words. Do cancel your weak phrase, don't use "in other words," then state your better version. Why waste space confusing the reader? In other words, don't use it!

In order, or *so as*. Before every infinitive "to . . . " the *in order* is useless fat. Without it the statement is clearer and unencumbered. *In order to read, I need my glasses*: declare the "in order" out of order; omit it. *To read, I need my glasses* says the same thing in fewer words. This same argument goes for *so as*.

Located. By eliminating the useless *located* in all your writing, you save time, space, and materials. If you dislocate the located from *Boulder Dam is located in Nevada*, you have the shorter and cleaner *Boulder Dam is in Nevada. The office is ~~located~~ in room 313*. To locate is a double-edged word that can mean either *to place* or *to find*; opposite intentions. *Locate the gauge located in the kit* can mean either *Find the gauge placed in the kit*, or *Place the gauge you find in the kit*. Do not leave your reader wondering. Depending upon the direction of the sentence, use either alternate word to be clear. Yet another complication: Recently an acquaintance phoned and said, "Morris, I want to locate a young woman." I responded, "Have you tried Missing Persons?" "No you clown, I want to get her a job." You do not need *located* in conjunction with *any* form of the verb *to be*.

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The following or *as follows*. If a list or explanation is the next thing after a colon (:), then you do not need either of those expressions before the colon. A colon is a flashing red light that proclaims something follows immediately hereafter. It speaks for itself, eliminating the need for *the following*, or *as follows*. *To start writing a novel, you need the following*: can be written more succinctly as *To start writing a novel, you need*: . . . Further, *you can cut the deadheads as follows:* by just writing *To cut the deadheads*:

Period of time. A quart can be the measure of bourbon, or ice cream, or engine oil, and thus must be so labeled. But period is a unit that measures only time. In common use today is the too often *period of time*. You need only one, either *I've been teaching for a long period* or *I've been teaching for a long time*. Either, or, but not both. And *at this point in time* is best written as *now*.

Another gem of the same ilk: *cancel out*. If you cancel it, it's out!

At the start of a book, some publishers head the list of chapters as *Table of Contents*. Obviously it is a table, ergo just *Contents* is enough.

Raise it up or *lower it down*. Ever see anything raised or lowered sideways?

And, *needless to say*, is needless to say.

4.3.6 MANAGEMENT OF WORDS

Your management of words in a sentence has as much to say as the words themselves in the clear, correct conveyance of an idea. Careless or lazy transposition in the old chestnut "I saw the fire running around block" really means "Running around the block, I saw the fire." But the transposed original statement could be arrested by adding *while* to read its intended meaning: "*While* running around the block, I saw the fire."

A while ago, at an editorial meeting, the woman's work editor proudly displayed the jacket of her latest release, *The Effective Woman Manager*. I asked her if that were a book about a chap who managed his women with ease. She went up in a puff of blue smoke because in her haste to get the manuscript into print she neglected to see into her good title the possible malthinking of chauvinists. By rearranging those four words to *Woman, The Effective Manager*, not only would it have eliminated the erroneous misdirection, but it set *Woman*, the subjective word, as the title's first word.

Bring and take are not interchangeable. Properly each indicates the direction the subject moves in relation to the destination. Bring *comes in*: *bring home the bacon*, or, *bring in the milk*. Take *goes out*: *take this to the bank*, or *barbecue take out*, or *take me home*.

Less and fewer. Less deals with groups or collective nouns; fewer deals with individual units. *Less traffic*, but *fewer cars*; *less money*, but *fewer dollars*; *less time*, but *fewer hours*, or "*Europe is the less . . .* "[2]

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Those refers to the past. Use it after material that has been done or finished. *Those* were the days . . . *All those* were accomplished by nightfall.

Never utilize *utilize* when you can use *use*; and *lengthy* is a lengthy way of writing *long*.

These, now or future, is used in place of the eschewed "the following" or "as follows" when preceding a statement about something present or future. *These* are the tools available. *These* men will become eligible. . . . If you write about something past or earlier on the page, use *those* in place of *these*.

In your final manuscript copy, be absolutely sure the *position* of a word will make the sentence say what you mean. Take a simple, clear declaration:

I drank my daughter's beer.

Five words, six possible places to add an extra word.

(1) *I* (2) *drank* (3) *my* (4) *daughter's* (5) *beer* (6).

Now add the single word *only*, once in each space.

(1) *Only* I drank my daughter's beer.

That means *no one else did*.

(2) I *only* drank my daughter's beer.

That means *that's all I did.*

(3) I drank *only* my daughter's beer.

That means I drank *just Misty's, no one else's.*

(4) I drank my *only* daughter's beer.

That means *Misty has no sisters.*

(5) I drank my daughter's *only* beer.

That means *Misty had no other beers.*

(6) I drank my daughter's beer *only*.

That means I drank *just the beer, no kippers, no popcorn.*

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4.4 AVOID COMPLEX OR COMPLICATED SENTENCES

Be simple but not simplistic. (One is an easy read, the second is patting the reader on the head with juvenile discourse.) William of Occam (Ockham), "The Invincible Doctor" of fourteenth-century England, sagely advised, "Be simple in your explanations, don't multiply entities beyond necessity."[3] That sagacity is as true today as it has been over the past eight centuries. And Leonardo da Vinci, probably the most brilliant "engineer" of the Renaissance, wisely opined, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication" (app. 4.4).

4.5 AVOID JARGON AND COLLOQUIALISMS

Avoid jargon and colloquialisms, "institution-itis," hedging, and vague, noncommittal, or imprecise statements; be positive (see app. 4.5.1 and 4.5.2).

Some years ago Lieutenant Barton S. Finegan, Department of Naval Science at Cornell University, asked me to edit his annual report. Read both versions (fig. 4.5) and see how the reader-friendly version imparts the same facts in a shorter, far more accessible way.

Often have I advised: know your receiver, then write to suit both his reception levels (i.e., technical and comprehension). But you must realize that he might not be the only interested party. Do not "dumb down" for everyone's understanding because then your message may become so diluted that no one will understand. If you write on a specific aspect of a highly technical topic to a pinpointed reader, it is all right to be as complex as the conditions demand. For example, on page 14 of *The Energetics of Mitochondria*, J. E. Chappel (Ed. by J. J. Lead) writes,

> Thus, NAD+ is reduced by dehydrogenases in the tricarboxylate cycle in the matrix of the mitochondrion, and the resulting NADH is oxidized by the NADH dehydrogenase on the christae.

That paragraph is in its closest compass, no deadheads, no superfluous words. It is succinctly clear to its target audience. No one except they will read, understand completely, and be able to use that information properly. It will not matter to anyone else.

In contradistinction to the previous Chappell example, a message addressed to the general public must not be written in institution-itis. Because the audience is unlimited, both receiver levels are unlimited also. Do not assume everyone is "hip to your jive," nor even "in sync" with it.

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FIGURE 4.5.

Archaic (Impersonal-Passive)	Current (Humanistic-Active)
The NROTC Sail Training Program at this University has matured into a most professional and successful endeavor. Voluntary integration with the Athletic Department's Sailing Program has fostered a beneficial interchange of information and resources. Six damaged and aging sailboats were borrowed from the Athletic Department, of which five have been refurbished and are presently operational on Cayuga Lake. The training provided on those boats has become a welcome addition to the "Big Boat" training which is conducted aboard China Doll, the NROTC Yacht. Outfitted with the latest equipment, and capable of embarking a crew of 12 for extended periods of time, China Doll has proved to be an excellent vehicle on which many of the following skills such as navigation, seamanship, shiphandling, and leadership can be taught. China Doll is at the present time cruising the Atlantic coast with a crew of officers and midshipmen visiting various ports of call. It should be noted that this type of training for our future Naval Officers is certainly a superb complement to the NROTC academic program. (175 words)	The NROTC Sail Training Program at Cornell has matured into a most professional and successful effort. Our students have worked closely with the Athletic Department's Sailing Instructor. This achieved beneficial exchanges of information and resources. We borrowed six damaged and aging sailboats from the Athletic Department. NROTC students completely refurbished five boats, and are now sailing them on Cayuga Lake. The training we provide on those boats is a welcome addition to the "Big Boat" sailing aboard the NROTC Yacht, China Doll. Outfitted with the latest equipment, and capable of embarking 12 for extended periods, China Doll is an excellent vehicle aboard which students can acquire skills in navigation, seamanship, shiphandling, and leadership in a real environment. China Doll is now cruising the Atlantic coast, with a crew of officers and midshipmen, visiting various ports of call. We believe this sort of training for our future Naval Officers is a superb complement to our academic program. (153 words)

Brooke Knapp is the first pilot to have flown around the world via a great-circle route that naturally took her over both poles. En route she made an emergency stop at Recife, Brazil. She later described it to the world via the public press in pure jargon. The San Jose (California) *Mercury News*, for Wednesday, November 23, 1983, quoted her as saying,

> We took off out of Recife and selected "gear-up," and the mains came up but the nose wheel didn't, and we decided that wasn't a very good configuration for flying.

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So we tried to recycle the gear. We put the landing gear selector "gear down." The gear did not go down so we had to blow it down with the alternate extension.

Interesting: In today's vernacular, "gear-up" could mean *prepare well for*; "good configuration" connotes *nice shape*; "recycle the gear" calls to mind *salvage it for materials*; "gear down" is *what you do to save wear on vehicle brakes*; and "blow it down" is *what high winds do to signs*.

There was no need for such insider lingo. That quote is too high-tech, aimed at postgraduate, seasoned specialists. It should have been accessible to everyone.

YOUR FINISHED DOCUMENT MUST REWARD YOUR EFFORT.

NOTES

1. James Thurber, *Men, Women and Dogs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).
2. John Donne (1572–1631), *Meditation XVII*.
3. "*Entia non sunt multiplicanda prater neccessitatium*" (attributed); "*Frustra fit per plura quod potest fieri per pauciora*" (confirmed).

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